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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 002766

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TAGS: [ES](#) [KCRM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KHLG](#)
SUBJECT: SACA'S COMMISSION CHATS WHILE MURDER RATE RISES

REF: A. SAN SALVADOR 2526

[1](#)B. SAN SALVADOR 2661

Classified By: DCM Michael A. Butler. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The GOES released new figures on November 14 that show murders are up in October over September, rising to 339 homicides last month alone. The Saca Administration paradoxically responds that the numbers are not entirely negative. They point to the fact that the murder rate is down in some of the 20 most violent municipalities. While the efforts at better coordination between municipal government and the police in the most dangerous areas may be good news, the overall increase in the murder rate is decidedly bad news. In other bad news, six prisoners have been murdered in different prisons in the first two days of the week, and a prison director was wounded in an assassination attempt at a roadblock outside of San Miguel. The Ambassador's October 16 message to stop crime now inspired a flurry of positive commentary and reflection from all sectors of society. This reflection and debate has led to some very positive long-term planning, including proposals by leading think-tank FUSADES, and the creation of the new Anti-Crime Commission to study the issue (reftel B), but it has not led to immediate action to get criminals off the street--as the Ambassador urged. While the Commission deliberates over possible solutions, violent crime in El Salvador continues to rise. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) After three months of not reporting homicide rates, the Ministry of Governance released new figures yesterday to leading daily La Prensa Grafica. The numbers (reflecting police statistics that do not include victims who die later while being cared for in a hospital) show 291 murders for September, with 339 in October. This brings the overall number of murders in 2006 to 3,076, slightly up from the 3,043 reported for the same period in 2005. Despite this seven percent rise in the murder rate in one month, the GOES points to municipalities like San Martin, where efforts between the police and municipal government to ban arms in public places and better coordinate the involvement of local residents apparently contributed to decreases in the murder rate. (Note: The issue of access to more reliable crime indicators was a major theme of a recent anti-crime plan released by leading think-tank NGO Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES). Discrepancies between police statistics and Institute of Legal Medicine (IML) numbers, combined with recent efforts of the Ministry of Governance to not report violent crime figures, has made analysis very difficult for civil society advocates. End Note).

[1](#)3. (U) At the same time these numbers were released, news broke that two prisoners were murdered at the Chalatenango

Penitentiary on November 13, and four additional prisoners were murdered at the Ciudad Barrios Penitentiary in San Miguel on November 14. Near San Miguel on November 14, Warden Nelson Miguel Hernandez of the San Francisco Gotera Penitentiary in Morazan was wounded in an assassination attempt by masked gunmen who stopped his car at a roadblock. Initial reports of the murders indicated they were committed by the maras in a brutal show of violence to protest new government restrictions on frequency of conjugal and other family visits, measures intended to reduce levels of contraband in prisons. Minister of Governance Figueroa told the press he does not believe this, and instead posited that they were retribution killings among rival gang members.

14. (C) The new Anti-Crime Commission has made initial consultations and is reported to be contemplating three recommendations: stricter gun control, increased resources for the police, and the passage of a RICO-style law to prosecute gang members for participating in organized crime. The Commission's third meeting will take place next Tuesday, but Embassy contacts report that the Commission has not addressed any substantive issues thus far. Some leading members of the Commission have actually urged that the Legislative Assembly refrain from passing any new anti-crime laws for at least the next two weeks as the Commission prepares its own recommendations. The other area the administration has addressed is media coverage of crime. On November 10, major media outlets in the country, including major newspapers and television and radio stations signed an agreement to report on crime in a more "humane and responsible" manner. This includes not publishing images of crime victims' corpses, refraining from speculation regarding those responsible for specific crimes, and portraying a more positive image of the country. Embassy contacts close to the presidency have assured Polcouns that President Saca's political advisers had a direct hand in urging the media to sign on to such an agreement, in order to take public pressure away from the president on the burgeoning violent crime issue. Saca, in fact, has been publicly ebullient about the media agreement, saying that presenting a more positive image in the media will help reduce crime by helping introduce a culture of nonviolence.

15. (C) COMMENT: The Ambassador's October 16 speech has been viewed by key opinion-makers and the most influential elements in the private sector, inter alia, as having coalesced public opinion to demand immediate solutions to the violent crime and mara problem. Nearly a month later, major newspaper editorials continue to enthusiastically support the Ambassador's call for action, and a broad array of Embassy contacts continue to lavish praise on the speech. However, despite this positive feedback, the signal for immediate action has so far elicited only another commission to study the problem further. Post will continue to press the National Assembly to pass key legislation now, such as a RICO law and an asset forfeiture bill, and let the commission deliberate on its own timetable.
Barclay